

Formation of Korean Alphabet*

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0. Introduction

There are many different kinds of writing systems in the world. Among these writing systems, some represent the meaning, while others represent the sounds of the language. There are some that were used by ancient peoples but are no longer in use; and there are some that have been in use for several thousand years without interruption. Among all these systems, there is Hangul.

If we compare Hangul with other modern writing systems, there are two points in particular which must be kept in mind.

1. Most modern writing systems have evolved over a long period of time, and we do not know whom to credit with their creation, nor can we say when they were created. We know, however, when and by whom Hangul was invented.

2. Most modern writing systems have been in use for thousands of years. By comparison, Hangul is one of the youngest writing systems in use, only 542 years old. Therefore, we can well imagine that at the time of inventing Hangul, its creators were able to weigh carefully the pros and cons of existing writing systems. It is no accident that the relationships among the Hangul letters themselves, and between the letters and the sound-values they represent, are very systematic and logical.

Koreans take great pride in the uniqueness of Hangul. This pride may be the result of the emphasis placed on Hangul's excellence which begins early in grammar school when students start to learn Hangul. Hangul is certainly easy to learn.

* This paper was originally presented at a colloquium of the Center for Korean studies, University of California, Berkeley on March 27, 1986 when the author was in residence as a visiting scholar.

This revised paper is now presented as part of the tribute to Professor Chan-Ho Hwang on his retirement.

There is a corollary to this situation illustrated by the following anecdote. A young Korean student who went to Europe to study boasted to his western friends about how wonderful Hangul is. He expounded on the merits of Hangul's scientific nature. When he had finished, one of the friends who had listened to the story asked the young Korean student, "But why don't you use the Roman alphabet in your country?" The point of this story is that no matter how scientific Hangul is, or how easy it is to learn, it is perceived as such only by those who know Korean and write in Hangul.

Stepping aside from the traditional or popular view, I will try to take a more objective point of view. This paper will progress through three stages: the first concerns the hidden purpose behind the creation of Hangul, the second concerns the state of written language in Korea prior to Hangul's creation, and the third concerns the characteristics of Hangul as a writing system. It is this last section in which I will present what I consider a new theory on the origin of Hangul.

In the past the origin of Hangul has been of great interest to many scholars, but there was and still are many questions still unanswered concerning its origin.

1. The purpose of the creation of Hangul

When Hangul was created it was called Hun-Min-Jung-Um (訓民正音), or "Proper sounds for the instruction of the people." Our understanding of the purpose of the creation of Hangul hinges upon the correct interpretation of this name Hun-Min-Jung-Um. For this reason it is helpful to examine King Sejong's preface introducing Hun-Min-Jung-Um. This preface, contained at the beginning of "Hun-Min-Jung-Um Hae-Rye-Bon" (Illustration of 訓民正音), which will be discussed later, clearly states the purpose of creating Hangul. It reads as follows:

"Because Korean and Chinese are different languages, the use of Chinese characters (for expressing Korean) is not convenient for communication; therefore, even though there are many things that the "foolish masses" wish to express, they will never in actuality be able to express their thoughts. I find these circumstances pitiable. Thus I have created 28 new letters which can be easily learned so that from now on their daily life will be comfortable!"

King Sejong's declaration might seem on the surface to be democratic but this so-called democratic expression does not really connote democratic thought. For example, note the phrase "foolish masses." Although it is true that King Sejong loved all of his subjects, they were divided into two classes. On the one side were "the foolish masses" and on the other side were the nonfoolish "intellectual masses."

This class distinction was clearly seen in terms of the use of written language. Since "the intellectual masses" had already learned Chinese characters with which they could freely communicate, Hangul was of little or no use to them. King Sejong intended Hangul to be used by the "ignorant masses" who did not know Chinese characters.

Thus it is clear that King Sejong intended Hangul only as a second written language. If Sejong had wanted Hangul to be the only written language, then at the time of Hangul's invention the use of Chinese characters would have been stopped, and writing only in Hangul would have been stressed. But in all the publications that appeared during King Sejong's reign, there is no evidence to show that Sejong insisted on using only Hangul. Official government documents, historical writings and all other important papers were still written in Chinese characters. Academic research was also carried out in Chinese. Books written in Hangul were only for the education of the "foolish" class. A large number of such materials were Buddhist texts. The people who read these books were usually women of the aristocracy or of the gentry. It is safe to say that the women of that time belonged to the class of "foolish" people. At that time, women, even members of the gentry class, could neither become scholars nor participate in government administration. Simply put, they were not seen as "intellectual" people. Therefore, we cannot hide the fact that Hangul was the secondary writing system while Chinese remained the primary system.

In addition to serving as a low status script for the "ignorant masses," Hangul also had great value as an aid in dealing with other writing systems. For instance, Hangul helped in the task of correcting the general pronunciation of Chinese characters in Korea at that time. Hangul was issued at about the same time as the book called *Dong-guk-Jung-Un* (東國正韻, East-Nation-Standard-Pronunciation) was published. The title *Dong-Guk-Jung-Un* may be translated as "Dictionary of the Standard Korean Pronunciation of

Chinese Characters.” King Sejong was worried because at that time Korean and Chinese pronunciations of Chinese characters differed. Sejong felt that Korean and Chinese pronunciations should be the same, or at least quite similar. He therefore developed a new standard for Korean pronunciations that was closer to Chinese (or Sino-Korean) pronunciation.

There is also other evidence that Hangul was used as a secondary writing system. In Sejong’s time, Korea had diplomatic relations with other nations as well as China. When Mongolian, Manchurian and Japanese languages had to be learned, the approximate sounds of these languages could be recorded in Hangul. Again, Hangul could function as a phonetic transcription system.

Of course, it is a fact that Hangul was widely used by the common people of Korea, but not until the middle of the 20th century did Hangul move from its place as a second class writing system to take over the first-place position held by Chinese characters. Such was the strength of the tradition founded in Sejong’s time.

2. The state of written language prior to Hangul’s creation

The preface of Sejong’s Hun-Min-Jung-Um made it clear that Chinese is not a suitable notation system for Korean. Nevertheless, the Koreans learned and used Chinese characters from about the first century A.D. due largely to their geographic location. From about the fourth or fifth century, the scholars and high officials read and wrote in Chinese without serious difficulty. When they spoke, they spoke in Korean and when they wrote, they wrote in classical Chinese. This was certainly a disparity between the written and spoken language, a phenomenon similar to the middle ages when the priests of various western nations would speak in their mother tongues but write in Latin.

In addition there were also various ways that Koreans used the Chinese characters to record Korean language; rules and systems to represent Korean were steadily developed from very early times. Chinese characters have three elements; shape, meaning and sound. If we concentrate on the character’s shape, we realize that the shape represents both the sound and the meaning. From this feature Koreans developed two types of readings when they started to use characters. Specifically, first, a character could be classified by its meaning and read using the equivalent Korean vocabulary item; or

second, it could be read with its Koreanized Chinese sound. For example "chŏn" (heaven 天) could be read either using the sound method as "chŏn" or using the first method as "hanŭl" in Korean.

These two methods were used to transcribe Korean from very early times. At first, mainly proper nouns were recorded, (personal names, place names, governmental titles) but gradually complex phrases were transcribed as well, and rules for the transcription of official documents and monuments were developed. However, these transcriptions were imperfect things that were neither Chinese nor Korean in composition. This was because of the difficulty in developing in a short time means of representing complex functional postpositions such as the well known Korean noun and verb postpositions. Eventually though a type of system for recording poetry with Chinese characters was devised. This transcriptional system, called "Hyang-chal," first began to appear around the fifth or sixth century A.D., and developed more fully during the seventh or eighth centuries. Today 25 poems, called "Hyang-ka," transcribed by the "Hyang-chal" method represent an important part of the ancient Korean literature.

At the same time that this transcription system for the "Hyang-ka" was perfected, a series of rules were also developed to translate the Chinese classics into Korean. On the premise that Chinese culture cannot be imported without the understanding of the classics, the classics were translated, so as to be better understood. In translation, two features of Korean turn out to have presented the most problems. They are (1) "functional postposition" and (2) reorganization of the word order.

As we all know, Chinese (like English) has an SVO construction, while Korean has an SOV construction. Surmounting this syntactic structural disparity and inserting complex functional postpositions was the basic formula for doing this translation. How then were these translation methods recorded and how were they taught? If there were no relevant documents left from the Silla or Koryo periods, we would not be able to understand the process.

In the winter of 1973, a new set of data was discovered and gave us great insight into the translation rules. What was discovered was five pages of the Chiwi Jen-Wang Pranjaparamita Sutra (舊譯仁王般若波羅密經, also called Jen-Wang Ching or In-Wang-Kyŏng) stored inside a statue of the

Buddha. This In-Wang-Kyōng expresses patriotic thoughts and praise of nirvana (pure land). It was read only during the Koryo period. There is no doubt that it preceded Hangul's creation.

Today this material is called "In-Wang-Kyōng Ku-Kyul," (仁王經口訣). "Ku-Kyul" (口訣) means functionally "notational system of grammatical postpositions and functional words." Because this text exemplifies "Ku-Kyul" it is referred to in this manner. This "Ku-Kyul" is like "Hyang-chal" in that it uses and records the meaning and pronunciation of Chinese characters. "Ku-Kyul" has a formula for recording the complete Chinese character and the simplified character forms. Because it is usually written next to the original character from early times simplified forms were developed to save space and time. This In-Wang-Kyōng text shows only the simplified "Ku-Kyul." Although we do not know the original forms preceding the simplified "Ku-Kyul" letters, we can guess at the basic principles of their use. Briefly, they are as follows.

1) The Ku-Kyul or the so-called "functional postpositions" were written to the right and left of the original text.

2) In reading a text, one reads the Ku-Kyul on the right of the text, and skips the Ku-Kyul on the left.

3) When the end, marked with a dot, of a section of Ku-Kyul on the right is reached, go back and read the Ku-Kyul on the left which was skipped the first time through. [see example below]

大
衆
歡
喜
散
金
花

Here at the left is an example of this.

Now we must turn our attention to the simplified "Ku-Kyul." It is obviously a phonetic system developed from Chinese characters. This is how the Japanese syllabary called "Kana" is derived. But Koreans tend to deny the existence of the Ku-Kyul system (or at least down play it) in favor of the entirely new Hangul. Perhaps the simplified Ku-Kyul that appears in the "In-Wang-Kyōng" was the "data base" used in the eventual creation of Hangul.

3. The original model for Hangul

There are many scholars doing research on Hangul; some scholars, such as Gari Ledyard, have made Hangul their specialty.

Traditionally, there were four groups of theories concerning Hangul's model for forming the letters. The first is that Hangul was originally from the ancient Chinese classic seal writing system; the second is that Hangul is originally from ancient Sanskrit; the third is that Hangul came from Mongolian phagspa scripts and the last are various other theories.

Soon after Hangul was created, Hun-Min-Jung-Um Hae-Rye-Bon(訓民正音解例本) was published, however the book disappeared shortly afterwards. As a result the theories mentioned above were intermittently discussed for the past 500 years. In 1940, a copy of Hun-Min-Jung-Um Hae-Rye-Bon was found in an old house in Andong city in Korea, and the philosophy that shaped the form of Hangul's basic letters became known. According to the book Hae-Rye-Bon (解例本) vowels symbolize "the three elements of the Universe."; the three elements are the trinity of Heaven, Earth and Man, which are the three great elements of the universe with man as the center. The use of these three elements as a model for the vowels was the result of applying oriental philosophy. The philosophical idea that human language reflects the regularity (or order) of the Universe is contained in this philosophy. In Western thought, however, Heaven is God; the earth is the natural environment, and Man is the master of the nature.

The basic letters for the consonants are five shapes that are modeled after the articulatory organs.

1) ㄱ, taken from the shape of the tongue as it touches the velum;
 2) ㅋ, taken from the shape of the tongue as alveolar sounds are produced;
 3) ㆁ, taken from the shape of the lips as labials are produced; 4) ㆁ, taken from the shape of the teeth, representing the production of sibilants; and finally, 5) ㅇ, the opening of the glottis, representing glottal sound. From each of these five, two or three more letters were made by adding new strokes. These signs show us how advanced their phonological understanding was at that time.

Looking more closely, it is important to explain; (1) Why were the vowel letters philosophically explained, while the consonant letters were explained by phonological theory? (2) What relationship is there between the philosophy and the phonological theory? (3) Is there a philosophical relationship which underlies the consonants as well? These questions have for many scholars been solved by the material contained in Hun-Min-Jung-

Um Hae-Rye-Bon but I have found such explanations too superficial. Several years ago, while I was looking at an engraving in a Zen Buddhist text, I gained a new insight. The engraving depicted a monk meditating on three shapes. The three shapes were a circle, a square and an equilateral triangle (○, □, △). That monk seemed to be contemplating the relationship among these three symbols. (cf. Appendix) I learned from a Buddhist scholar that from early on those "three elements of the Universe" were one of the basic materials for the Buddhist monk's meditation. From the time of synthesizing Buddhism and the ethnocentric indigenous Chinese world-view into a typical Chinese form of Buddhism, namely Zen, scholars in all the three spiritual traditions in China, should have utilized the archetypal symbols of Heaven, Earth and Man in representing the fundamental elements of homocentric universe as was amply employed in the Book of Change or in the Tao-te-ching.

It stands to reason that Korean scholars at the time of Hangul's invention must have been well acquainted with these three elements and their symbols.

Based on this, I believe that these three symbols provided the basic forms for the Hangul letters. For vowels, the three shapes were further simplified into •, —, and |, then they were combined to make eleven vowel letters. As for consonants, five symbols were necessary for five groups of sounds. In order to derive five letters from the three shapes, I believe the square □ was diagonally divided into two as ▤ and ▥. With the combination of these five shapes, 17 consonant letters can be made. I surmise that the basic forms for all the letters, vowels and consonants, were derived from these three symbols, heaven ○, earth □, and man △. Hun-Min-Jung-Um Hae-Rye-Bon does not provide conclusive proof of this theory, and additional corroborative evidence is unavailable. Although this lack of conclusive proof is a problem, it may be applied with equal force to the other theories regarding the origin of Hangul.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed the motivation for creating Hangul, the state of writing systems prior to Hangul and the original symbols upon which Hangul was based. Throughout this discussion, I have tried to be objective and avoid fanciful preconception.

In summary, first, we know that Hangul was not created solely for use by the common people. It was also created to accommodate the use of Chinese characters more efficiently. Secondly, we know that Hangul, often considered one of the highest intellectual achievements by Koreans, was not created in a vacuum lacking antecedents.

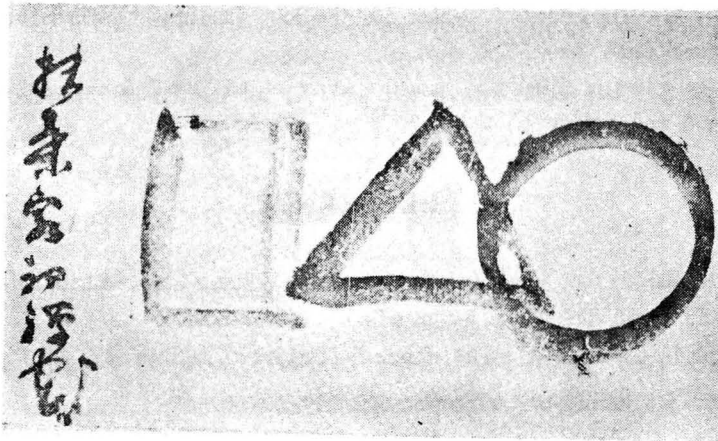
Prior to Hangul there was Ku-Kyul, a writing system similar to Japanese Kata Kana, which was widely used even though it was not quite adequate for transcribing Chinese characters into Korean. This inadequacy, it is believed, provided a strong impetus to create a new writing system. Thirdly, it is postulated that the original model for the shape of Hangul letters consists of a circle, square, and triangle representing the three Universal Elements, known in Korea as "sam-jae" (三才), or "san-tsai" in Chinese.

The beauty of Hangul is its amazing simplicity: the simplicity of its original models (or "sam-jae"), the simplicity of the derivation of the shape of the letters from the original models, and the simplicity of representation of the complex Korean sound system.




I would like to quote from Geoffrey Sampson's recent book titled "Writing System":


"Whether or not it is ultimately the best of all conceivable scripts for Korean, Hangul must unquestionably rank as one of the great intellectual achievements of humankind." (p. 144)

APPENDIX



CIRCLE, TRIANGLE, AND SQUARE, by Sengai

These are the three fundamental Forms of the universe, Godhead, Nature, Manhood. The Circle is finite infinity, timeful timelessness. The Triangle is fixed, unalterable Natural Law, perfect in the Galaxy, and "the speck of stone which the art stirs, and moves on." The Square is human, and vulnerable, the shape of the (primitive) bricket, the house, the castle, the city, the state 國. The Circle, Triangle and Square can be inscribed within and circumscribed without each other: , , and also ad infinitum, . We are reminded of the ancient occult and alchemistic symbols.

Dr. Suzuki writes to me: My interpretation is: ○ represents "Formlessness," "Emptiness," or "Void," where there is yet no separation of Light and Darkness. △ symbolizes "the beginning of form out of formlessness." □ is the combination of triangles  and represents the multitudinosity of things. In short, ○ △ □ is a kind of creation story.

There is, however, another interpretation. Sengai may have wished by this to synthesize Shingon, Tendai, and Zen. ○ is Zen.

△ is the three mysteries of Shingon, which are: mouth (口) mystery or "oral secrets" (密); the body secrets (身); and mind secret (mystery) (意). These three secrets are known as the Sanmitsu (三密). The Shingon teaches the unity of the three— oral, bodily, and mental.

△ may also be regarded as corresponding to Tendai's 空假中 (Emptiness, Phenomenality, and the Middle which latter means "synthesis" or "identity"). The Tendai teaches the identity of Emptiness and this phenomenal world which is temporal and spatial.

□ is 四大 (four "greats") which are the four elements of which the world is composed: earth, water, fire, wind.

Sengai's idea is probably to state the unity of all the Buddhist teachings: Zen, Shingon, and Tendai.

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